

# Grand flying heritage

by Rick Johnston

Imagine flying at 3,000 feet over the Tustumena benchlands in an open cock pit Travel Air 7,000 biplane. Your Travel Air Pegasus is equipped with floats and your pilot is Alaska flying legend Russell Merrill. The year is 1929 and aviation is new to the Kenai Peninsula and every flight an adventure. Tustumena Lake unfolds before you like a vast prairie before a galloping stallion. The world, for the moment, is yours for the taking. Seventy years later, both residents and visitors to the Kenai Peninsula have many opportunities to almost duplicate such wonderful flight-seeing adventures over the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Although the open cockpits of the early biplanes have been replaced by the relative comfort of Cessnas, DeHavilands and Pipers, aviators and passengers can still experience many of the same sights, wildland viewing, and emotions shared by the early fliers. Wildlife and wildlands still provide the same allure that they did for pioneering pilots like Russell Merrill, Ed Young and Matt Nieminen, who flew for Anchorage Air Transport. Thanks to the foresight of early Peninsula residents and visitors who sought to protect this rich legacy of wildlands, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge remains much the same as when the first airborne hunters, fishermen, and explorers experienced it from the air in the 1920's.

Aviation on the Kenai Peninsula, like most places in Alaska remains an inseparable part of the culture and history, not to mention the source of some tales of adventure and misfortune.

In the Interior some areas have tundra flats or other natural features that facilitate aircraft operations, but it is the numerous and well distributed lakes on the Kenai Peninsula that make it one of the best flying destinations in Alaska and indeed in North America. There are hundreds of lakes that can be safely landed on, many of which provide outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities.

Managers of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (and its predecessor the Kenai National Moose Range) have used aircraft in every aspect of management since the arrival of the first Moose Range manager in 1948; World War II flying veteran Dave Spencer was chosen for the top post in part due to his flying skills.

There had been a lot of moose poaching on the Peninsula, and the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife wanted biologist/pilot Spencer to solve the problem.

The Grumman Widgeon and Grumman Goose became the workhorses on the Kenai Refuge and throughout Alaska. Then, as today, aircraft were used for wildlife surveys, radio telemetry, vegetation mapping and inventory, fisheries management, law enforcement patrols, cargo and crew transport, fire suppression and management, and search-and-rescue. Many lost hikers, hunters and other Refuge visitors have been located by Refuge pilots.

Refuge manager/pilots such as John Hakala, Will Troyer, Averill Thayer, Bob Richey, Vern Berns and others flew tens of thousands of hours over the Kenai Peninsula and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge during their distinguished flying careers. The safety record of these Refuge pilots was second to none despite often difficult flying conditions. Many of the hours were what the Department of Interior calls "special use" flying which require a high level of skill and training due to low level flying or inherent risk of particular assignments.

John Hakala caught his first glimpse of the Kenai from the air while piloting a B-25 during a military training flight out of Anchorage. He didn't know then that he would later pilot Refuge aircraft during two separate duty assignments as Refuge Manager, and retire on a popular float plane lake in the Soldotna area.

Refuge managers have often sought the assistance of local flying services, especially for helicopters. At least one Kenai Peninsula-based helicopter service is used statewide on difficult wildlife capture projects. Many of these sought-after skills were honed right here on the Kenai Peninsula and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Private air taxis from Lake Hood in Anchorage and from locations on the Kenai Peninsula have been transporting hunters, fisherman, sightseers and trappers to Refuge destinations since the early days of Anchorage Air Transport. Several Kenai Peninsula air services had financial arrangements with early trappers for remote drop-offs and pick-ups, and mid-winter supply flights. Greg Brown, a lifelong Alaskan,

was by all accounts a very skilled pilot and outdoorsman and transported people to many remote locations via his Kenai-based airplane. Brown's Lake formerly within the Refuge was named after Brown.

The Kenai Peninsula is extremely popular as a float plane destination, and also experiences a large volume of commercial and general aviation usage. According to the FAA there are 5,699 active pilots within an hour's flight of the Refuge, and more than 8,000 general aviation and commercial aircraft in Alaska. Aircraft use in a popular area near such a high population of pilots and commercial flight services has not been without problems. Trumpeter swans and floatplane fishermen often prefer the same lakes, sometimes resulting in displacement of nesting trumpeter swans and lower swan productivity due to disturbance.

Some visitors using lakes accessible by roads and trails have been distressed by busy aircraft operations. Furthermore some with airplanes have used them as a tool for unfair or unethical advantage for hunting big game. As early as 1970, Refuge and state game managers published aircraft and wildlife regulations to reduce airplane-wildlife and airplane-people conflicts,

and to insure fair chase for Peninsula wildlife. The northern lowlands of the Kenai Refuge became one of the first places in Alaska to restrict the use of airplanes for hunting moose during the first ten days of the season. Subsequently state and federal laws and regulations such as the prohibition from hunting the same day airborne were passed.

Often the pilots themselves have proposed regulations to guide their use of Refuge lands. Today, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has perhaps the best set of aircraft use and access regulations insuring wildlife values and visitor experiences, while continuing the rich aviation tradition of the Kenai Peninsula. For visitors seeking flights over or to destinations on the Refuge, there are several permitted and reputable air services ready to meet most flying needs. For more information on the flying history on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, contact me or visit the Alaska Aviation Heritage museum on Lake Hood.

*Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot at [Kenai National Wildlife Refuge](#) and has been flying for the Refuge since 1985.*